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SUBJECT: POLISH FM OFFERS HELICOPTERS FOR KANDAHAR

REF: OTTAWA 0175

Classified By: PolMinCouns Scott Bellard, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) During a February 3-4 visit to Ottawa, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radoslaw Sikorski informed Canada that Poland was prepared to offer two Russian-made helicopters to support Canadian Forces in Kandahar. According to Polish Embassy DCM Artur Michalski Sikorski -- during a private one-on-one meeting with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, two separate meetings with Defence Minister Peter MacKay, a meeting with Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier, and a call on Speaker of the House of Commons Peter Milliken as well as in a public speech -- voiced strong support for NATO's mission in Afghanistan (highlighting Canadian contributions) and the need for greater burden-sharing among NATO partners. Michalski said that the Canadian leaders did not specifically request Polish troops for Kandahar during these meetings; Michalski, however, confirmed that Poland intends to send additional troops to RC-East but not to RC-South. The Canadians asked only what more Poland could do to help in Kandahar, and appeared pleased with the Polish offer of helos, pilots, and maintenance crews (probably about 20 personnel in all), Michalski said. He commented that the Canadians appeared confident that the government could eventually convince Parliament to support the extension of the Afghan mission for Canadian Forces (CF). Michalski vigorously denied rumors that the Polish helo offer was in any way connected with a Polish request for abolition of the visa requirement for Polish citizens traveling to Canada, but admitted that visas were a subject of brief discussion with Bernier, who indicated that Canada was likely to act favorably by year's end. Sikorski did not meet with Canadian opposition politicians, nor did Canadian leaders encourage him to do so, Michalski added. The Foreign Minister did have a session with the active Polish-Canadian community, which numbers over 800,000 throughout the country. This was the first visit to Ottawa by a Polish Foreign Minister since 1996, Michalski noted.

2. (C) Associate Foreign Minister David Mulroney privately praised Sikorski's "enthusiasm and commitment" to the Afghanistan mission by Poland, Canada, and their NATO allies. While noting that the visit had gone "very well," he admitted that "we have to remain focussed on the much bigger picture," and indicated that Canada will in particular try to use the upcoming NATO Defense Ministers' meeting in Vilnius to try to pin down additional contributions of troops and equipment to back up the CF in Kandahar before the government puts the extension of the CF mandate to another vote in Parliament. Commenting on reports that the government may introduce a motion on the extension of the CF mandate in Kandahar after February 2009 as early as next week -- with a vote probable in late March -- Mulroney would only note that "careful thought is being given to the timing of a vote, and

that people will keep an eye on the international agenda."

13. (U) PM Harper during Question Hour in the House of Commons on February 6 specifically praised the new Polish offer, and confirmed that Canada would continue to seek additional contributions from NATO partners in order to support the continuation of the CF mission in Kandahar. He reiterated that Canada "continues to have important obligations to the Afghan people" and to NATO, but needs additional help. He admitted that "these are never easy decisions to make." He promised to introduce a motion proposing to extend the CF mission "very soon," and expressed a hope for extensive debate both in committee and in the full House.

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